

**Back Again, Back Again: A Ruined Palace for a Ruined King, Part
Two.**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode fourteen:
A ruined palace for a ruined king, part two.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: *You waited*, Cassian said, voice hard-yet-hopeful, *to come back*. He sat, posed across from me, at a table in the back corner of the tavern that, foolishly, at one point I'd begun to think of as *ours*. It was the same one we'd visited all the times we'd "snuck out" - *snuck out* in air quotes, dear listener. It was the same one I'd intercepted Cassian in, that festival night, in order to stake a claim or make a bargain. It was the same one in which I'd danced on the tables and got taught Rhysean poetry and Rhysean swears in much the same breath with Castor and Pollux, those two poets, and Myena, beautiful,

beautiful, beautiful. I'd always known it as raucous and joyous; a place protected against whatever terrible things happened directly outside.

That night, it was quiet. *Dead*, one could say, without stretching the point too far. There were a handful patrons at the bar: a few adventurers passing through with feet on the tables and a group of soldiers playing cards in the corner - I'd balked at them for just a second, scuffling my feet like a nervous doe at the entrance, before Cassian looked back at me and said, somewhat sadly, *Ilyaas*.

I had mentally cursed myself. What a stupid way to give up some part of my upper hand. I was not fearlessly returning. That was clear in my split-second failure.

I'd put on that facade, though, *the fearless return of your dearest friend*, in the time we spent in his room - his room, the place I left you last. I'm proud of it, that facade, in the backwards way you are when you do something in which you maybe expected to die and didn't. I'm ashamed of it in the throat-closing way that you are when you manipulate someone you still sort-of-loved, where the shame came half from you physically not being able to stop loving them and the other half being because of the betrayal you're serving them. I'm ashamed of it in the sense that my brain was reeling with *I must turn you or I must kill you and god, gods, gods, I do not want to do*

the second one and you have given me exactly one word of hope for the first. I'm ashamed of it because I stared, and smiled, and lifted my chin at him in his room.

But I'm ahead of myself. Fearless return of your dearest friend. That's as far as we are.

Ilyaas, he'd croaked, disbelieving and hoping against hope.

Hi, Cassian. I've missed you, I said, and managed something somewhere between a smirk and a bashful half-smile. Something that I'd practiced, in those free moments where I'd crafted that stupid fucking perrrrfect speech to him. Something that said, I hope you've missed me too and, contradictingly, you're glad I'm back, aren't you? Something to pull him into me. To pretend the last month-and-some-days hadn't happened.

But of course, he'd been wary. Of me, and of the joy that'd sparked across his face for just a second before he'd buried it behind a guarded neutral. For a second, he was a boy. For a second, I remembered him like he'd wanted me to.

You told me once, I'd said, the way I'd planned, that you would follow me anywhere. And you didn't. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off - and maybe that had been too much to ask. When I did. But I'm asking you for your trust now. Come with me. To our tavern.

And I guess we were the same in that way. Both of us hoping the other would change at the same rate as we did. Because he followed.

Back in the moment, back in the tavern - he was deep into a cup of something strong and sweeter than *traem*; I hovered in my seat at our booth and drank just enough that he wouldn't catch on that I was trying very hard to stay sober - I did not want to test to see if I'd miraculously stopped being a lightweight. I needed my wits; it almost seemed like he wanted to forget his.

Which was odd. Cassian did not often put himself at disadvantage like this.

You came back, he said. It wasn't hopeful.

I came back, I said.

He smiled, a bitter thing, teeth flashing sharp. It didn't look like him - it was the same way Io smiled. Maybe it was just the dark and the firelight. Maybe we both had kept changing while the other was away. *Is that because you missed me, and I asked you to come home, or is it because I said I was going to kill your poet?*

Your poet, too. I said. *And mine. If I am the eligida and I am your soldier, and they are my poet, doesn't that make them -*

He held out a hand. *Stop that, there. We have had this conversation before. Fate. Destiny. I don't care that you think something else. The people believe that Leander is the poet, and*

that threatens the crown. That threatens our poet - Io. We keep saying poet. You're making it sound like a nonsense word. In Rhysean, he said, Po-et-a. Now it's real again.

I laughed. You sound drunk. You're being too honest to be sober.

I'm killing a poet in the morning, he said, and then that awful, awful grin again. I wish I was drunk. But someone must keep their head. Tell me, Ilyaas. Am I a killer?

It was us, so it was English, but it lapsed, at the end, into that Rhysean word again. Deskina. Killer. This felt like a test - a word thrown in that I shouldn't know, in his perfect sheltered world. This felt like me saying, fretim, and everything going wrong. This felt like a trap.

I think we both are, I said slowly.

Cassian rocked his glass around its edge, spinning it and spinning it and spinning it. Relax. Please. he asked, and this was closer to the Cassian I knew. It wasn't a command. It was an ask, the way he used to ask.

I hesitated, for only a second, checking over my body, trying to see what had given me away, but this was Cassian and he knew me as well as I knew him. He'd caught the motion. He'd caught every motion. There is no army waiting to take you captive the moment you let your guard down, Ilyaas. You asked me to trust

you to here. It's just us, unless you're trying to lure me out to have my throat slit. It's just us.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. That would have been so easy, and it hadn't even crossed my mind. I couldn't decide if I was grateful or annoyed by that – but I still sounded hurt as I said, *Are you worried I would?*

And there was my Cassian. Disappointed, sad, suddenly sober. His brow furrowed. *Ilyaas*, he said, almost mournful. *I hope I won't ever have to fear that from you.*

And that hit like a load of bricks. I couldn't make my tongue work correctly. Finally, I managed, *I don't – I don't want to. I don't. I don't.*

He held my gaze. I held his, staring, staring, and trying not to cry. I swallowed, swallowed, hard, again, and caught myself. I gathered up the pieces that had started to fracture, and stuck them back into place, and prayed they'd stay.

So you are, then? I probed. Back to the mission. *Killing the poet?*

This was English. He caught the distinction. *No*, he snapped. And he had returned to his – newer Cassian. Sharper Cassian. *I'm killing a poet. The poet will hand me the blade when it is time.*

Cassian –

So that is why you came back? For them?

You told me to come back. I pulled, from my back pocket, the poster he'd had made of me, my face tilted up towards the invisible him. The picture he'd chosen, love in my eyes. Even in the hasty brushstrokes, god, you could tell. You told me to save Rhia. So I saved Rhia. You said not to forget who we were. And - here I am.

A month later.

It took time to remember.

He lifted his chin so he stared down his nose at me. A princeling, regal. I'm sure he'd wanted me to look at him like that and think, king. And what did you remember, Ilyaas? In your time away? What made you seek me out?

Here it was - the thing that I couldn't yet give him the answer to. What I wanted to say: because if I don't convince you to back down this ends with you dead at my hand. Because I can't let you kill our - not yours and mine, but mine and Callia's - poet. Because I need Leander, and I need you to see me, and I needed you out of the palace and like this. A little drunk.

So I leaned across the thin oak table and tilted my chin up, too. Because I remembered this, I said, and kissed him hard.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigaillelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org). Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. You are so, so very loved.

I hope you have a wonderful day.